

The Handwriting on the Wall

I recently attended a talk at Stanford by Walter Bradford Ellis, a too-little-known activist and writer on the issue of global poverty and world hunger. It's transcribed from a recording I made. The sound quality was lousy, so apologies if I've mangled some of the specifics.

Good evening. This is the first time I've spoken before a college audience, and therefore I would like to take advantage of your presence to ask you a few questions before I begin on my prepared speech. Basically I want to know how morally committed the students at a typical 'good' school are, and while I know an audience of several hundred from one school is neither large enough nor diverse enough to give an especially accurate picture, still the results should provide a rough indication of where the real truth lies. That's sort of an interesting juxtaposition of words. 'Truth lies' I mean.

Anyway, as I said, I'm interested in knowing how morally committed you are. I must say at the outset, I am pessimistic. At any rate, primarily what I want to find out tonight is how important it is to you for you to act according to your own definition of right and wrong. In other words I'm not interested in knowing what sort of behavior you think is right or wrong but merely how committed you are to living up to whatever standards of right and wrong you possess.

I was trying to think a few minutes ago what questions I could ask you to find out this information, and it is very difficult to come up with anything satisfactory simply because individual standards of right and wrong vary so markedly. I had to pick a situation which seems perhaps a little silly because it is so improbable, but that is because I wanted as pure a case as possible—one which is in no way connected with any existing world situation—so that your prejudices and preconceived notions about a particular situation will play no part in your answers.

My hypothetical circumstances are concerned with a person who murders innocent people, and I suspect that nearly every one of you will agree that that is wrong. So please now imagine yourself to be in an ancient country which is ruled over by an evil king who has absolute power of life or death over all his subjects—including yourself. Now this king is very bored, and so for his amusement he picks 10 of his subjects, men, women, and children, at random as well as an eleventh man who is separate from the rest. Now the king gives the eleventh man a choice: he will either hang the 10 people picked at random and let the eleventh go free, or he will hang the eleventh man and let the other 10 go free. And the eleventh man must decide which it is to be.

Now if death is bad, then on average 10 deaths must be 10 times as bad as one. So hopefully nearly all of you will agree that the eleventh man should give up his life in order that the other 10 might live. But that is not the question I am asking you. I'm asking whether you would in fact make that sacrifice if you were the eleventh man—if you really did have to decide whether you or they would die. And you knew the king meant business because he did this every year and sometimes killed the 10 people and other times the eleventh depending wholly upon what the eleventh had decided.

Now I am about to ask you for a show of hands, but of course I realize that few of you know yourselves so well that you can be certain of the correctness of your answer—especially if your answer is yes. So I will simply ask you to hold up your hand and answer yes if you are any more than 50% certain that you would make that sacrifice. Understand?

All right, all yes answers, please raise your hands. Let me see, that must be about a third of you. That's more than I would have guessed.

Now let me ask only those who are reasonably certain—say 95% certain—that they would make the sacrifice to please raise their hands.

Yes. That's more like what I expected. That's at most a tenth of you. I have a feeling that most of that tenth of you are kidding yourselves, but perhaps human beings aren't as selfish as I have always thought.

Now just two more quick questions. Same situation except that the king says he will let his 10 hostages go free if you will go to prison for 20 years, otherwise he kills them. That's an easier question to be sure of your answer about than the previous one, so this time answer yes only if you are quite certain—95% or better. All right everybody hold up his hand if he is at least 95% sure he would go to prison for 20 years in order to save 10 people's lives.

Well that looks like about three-quarters of you. Again I think you have overly high opinions of yourselves, or maybe some of you are too embarrassed to tell the truth, but I sincerely hope you are correct in your self-assessments.

Just one question more now. The king says he will let his people go if you will agree to give him all the money you have and all the money you will make in the future, except of course enough for you to feed and house yourself and take care of all the absolute necessities. In other words he's asking you to be poor, but not so poor that it impairs your health in any way. Again I'm asking for at least 95% certainty. All in that category please hold up your hands.

Well that's nearly every one of you! I'm very pleased; I hope you mean it. Perhaps in fact you do this time. After all, since you have the power to decide whether 10 people die or whether you give up your money, if you made the other decision you would be killing 10 people in order to make money for yourself, and surely that is murder.

I see some head-shaking—it looks as though a few of you disagree. The king has said, kill these 10 people or I'll take your money. If you kill them, that is murder.

Look at it another way. If you are poor and kill 10 people in order to steal their money, that is surely murder. But morally speaking, that situation is exactly the same as this one. In both situations if the people die, you will be rich; if they live, you will be poor, and it is within your power to decide which it is to be. In either situation if you decide that they should die in order that you can be rich, you have put your happiness, or not actually even that, you have put material riches for yourself above 10 people's lives. That is the moral error you have made and it is exactly the same for both cases. One is as bad as the other and if one is murder so is the other.

Anyway, those are all the questions I wanted to ask you. I didn't mean to spend as much time on them as I did, but at least from my point of view it was well worth the time. Thanks for your indulgence, and also for your soul-searching—I guess those weren't easy questions to answer if you answered them honestly. Just be happy it was a make-believe situation and none of you is likely ever to really be forced to make any of those rather unpleasant decisions.

And now I'll get on to what is supposed to be my topic: world hunger.

In 1650 the population of the world was 500 million (500M). Within the next 50 years an absolute minimum of 500M people will starve to death. The UN reports that around 10M people starve to death every year and the problem is only going to get worse as the population increases.

Perhaps that figure of 500M is too large for you to grasp in abstract terms. Let me translate it into something more concrete: if those 500M people were all to join hands, then figuring at about 1,000 people per mile, they would form a line long enough to stretch to the moon and back—with enough left over to reach across the United States 6 times. Or if you prefer keeping things more down to earth, they would reach 20 times around the world.

The US Army's M-16 machine-gun fires 700 rounds per minute, or about 12 rounds per second. If you drove a car past the line of people at a little over 40 miles per hour, you would pass 700 people every minute. If you used poisoned bullets or some such deadly concoction, you might be able to kill 1 person with every shot as you drove past. If you kept your finger on the trigger for 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, killing 1 person with every shot, it would take you 3 years and 4 months to kill them all.

It is a rather gruesome picture, and yet all these people—and probably many more—are absolutely doomed to die in the next 25 to 50 years. And it won't be the quick, easy death of a bullet, but the slow, pitiful, wasting death of starvation.

There is one bright spot in all this, however—the legions of the doomed will not really reach quite 20 times around the world. Perhaps they'll really only reach 12 or 15 times around, for most of them are children and their arms are short.

Opposed to these ravaged peoples of the world are the gluttons of America. You yourselves are good examples. As future graduates of a good college, it is surely within the grasp of most of you to be making a salary, after taxes, of \$50,000 or more within a few years. How much money is that? Well, you could easily take care of all the true necessities of life for \$20,000, thus leaving you \$30,000 for the luxuries. In America, anyone can stay healthy spending five dollars a day for food. It is not even hard to do. If one really skimps, he can stay alive and well for a dollar—for I have done it. If it can be done in America for a dollar a day, it can surely be done for that in the countries where people are starving. Thus your \$30,000 of luxury money could be providing 82 people with a dollar worth of food a day—people who otherwise might starve. Since presumably if your \$30,000 were donated to UNICEF, they would take care to pick out poorer than average people, I think it not unreasonable to state that \$30,000 per year over a period of 40 years is enough to keep healthy 10 people who would otherwise starve to death—plus a good many more who would otherwise be malnourished.

So you see, I lied to you a little while ago when I said none of you would ever have to make any of those three unpleasant decisions. You will never have to make the first or the second—the two hardest choices—but you are this moment confronted with the third: for the 10 who would otherwise starve are the 10 hostages, you are the eleventh man, and hunger is the king. Thus if you decide to go on with the life you were probably planning to lead, you will be letting 10 people die rather than give up your flat-screen television and your cocktail parties. And that is more than gluttony, it is murder.

Good evening.

Aaron again. I'd like to make a few remarks about the speech, but before I do I should admit something. The speech was not given by Walter Bradford Ellis. Instead, it was written by a too-little-known philosopher named Louis Pascal. He published it in the 1980s under the same subterfuge in the journal Inquiry and it was reprinted in Peter Singer's collection Applied Ethics. (I have modified it to bring the numbers up to date and shortened it a little to make it more blog-sized.) He justifies the subterfuge as necessary to get readers to more seriously engage in the thought experiment. I do think it would be wonderful to have this talk given in person, however. If you are interested in pursuing this, please let me know.

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December 6, 2007